

Peshwas and the rise of Maratha confederacy: A Study

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Abstract

This paper attempts to study how **the Maratha kingdom** was ruled by **Peshwas**, who were all ministers who served as the king's top executives and subsequently assumed the highest administrative post. By the mid-18th century, the city of Pune was in the ascendant on the political map of India. As the seat of the Peshwas, hereditary ministers to the Maratha king, this riverside town of little previous significance grew into a prominent centre of commerce and diplomacy, attracting large numbers of traders, artisans, courtesans and mercenaries. A massive season of construction was launched as the Peshwas—descendants of a clerk risen to greatness—left their enduring stamp on the city. They renamed areas that honoured previous Islamic rulers and introduced new temples and festivals into the lives of various castes and people. There was a massive population explosion too: One estimate suggests that Pune rose from being home to 25,000 residents in 1700 to 100,000 at the dawn of the next century, making it “equal to Copenhagen, bigger than New York, a little smaller than Marseilles”—but either way a major urban node in pre-colonial India.

The Maratha confederacy was founded in the 18th century after the collapse of Shivaji's Maharashtra state in western India due to Mughal pressure. Following the death of Mughal ruler Aurangzeb (1707), Shivaji's grandson Shahu restored Maratha authority. He gave the Brahman Bhat family, who became hereditary peshwas, authority (chief ministers). He also intended to advance northward using peshwas-controlled forces. The confederacy showed a broad sense of Maratha nationalism, but it was torn apart by the jealousies of its chiefs. The **Asht-Pradhan**, created by Shivaji too had become ineffective in administration. In these circumstances, the Maratha nobles were contending among themselves for power. The Peshwas of Shahu, found solutions to these problems by their capabilities. They rose to be good diplomats and commanders. They provided the Marathas an ideal – ideal of extending their power and influence towards the North. They rose above all other Maratha chiefs by sheer merit and they also led them to become the foremost power in India. The first Peshwa of Shahu was Balaji Vishwanath (1713-20 A.D.). He was the Sar Subahdar of Poona and Daulatabad when Shahu entered Maharashtra after his release from imprisonment of the Mughals. He sided with Shahu and also brought Dhanaji Jadav, the commander-in-chief of Tara Bai, to the rise of Shahu which helped him in capturing the throne of Maharashtra.

Key words: Maratha Empire, Mughal, Pune, Peshwas, Baji rao, Asht-Pradhan

Introduction

Having heated discussions over India's history is one of the country's favourite pastimes. These discussions are frequently reductionist, ignoring the richness and complexity of historical events as well as the many social milieus of pre-modern India. Too frequently, observers read their own prejudices into Indian history, either exaggerating the sectarian and religious components of interstate conflict or looking for a progressive vision of tolerance in the kingdom of some mediaeval monarch or another. The Maratha Empire was founded by the Maratha warrior-hero Chhatrapati (Emperor) Shivaji, in response to the chaos and misrule that prevailed in the Deccans in the late 17th century. This occurred as the Mughal Empire expanded into southern India. Hindu nationalists revere the Maratha Empire, which originated among a Hindu warrior people of the western Deccan peninsula. Their reverence stems from the fact that it was this state that reversed centuries of steadily increasing Muslim political control over the subcontinent.

This raiding tendency of the Marathas is what sparked a debate about the Maratha Empire in the wake of the film's release. Detractors of the Maratha Empire allege that the Marathas only wanted a kingdom for themselves, and thus their kingdom was "never Hindu," which ignores the fact that the dominant religion of the ruling class of any Indian state at this time was a major part of that state's character, regardless of how the religion was interpreted or applied in a political sense.

Further criticisms of the Maratha Empire allege that they were the "Mongols" of South Asia, who only campaigned for *chauth*, a fourth of the revenue of other kingdoms, whether Hindu or Muslim. Maratha raids against Bengal in 1742 and Jaipur in 1750 are especially criticized because these led to the deaths of many Hindus. But all this misses the point. Of course, like any other kingdom in the 18th century, the Maratha Empire meant to preserve itself, even if it meant fighting Hindus and allying with Muslims. The patchwork of states to emerge from the declining Mughal Empire at the time was so complex that it was inevitable that alliances of convenience between states of different religious denominations were the norm. There is no doubt that the Marathas, like all Hindu states, were influenced by Islamic practices, art, architecture, and warfare, and that later, Hindu nationalist historians exaggerated their Hindu credentials.

Yet there is no doubt that the imposition of the *jizya* tax on Hindus and the demolition of several important Hindu temples during the reign of the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb (who reigned from 1659-1707) would not have occurred under Maratha rule, thus incentivizing many Hindus to defect from the Mughal Empire during or after Aurangzeb's reign. Unquestionably, the Marathas were consciously Hindu and interested in establishing Hindu political power in the subcontinent. Though, like the Christian states of Iberia during the *reconquista*, they were also interested in fighting and allying with whomever suited their needs at the time.

Objective:

This paper intends to explore and analyze **Peshwa**, the post of chief minister among the Maratha people of India, which was initially the head of the raja Shivaji's advisory council (reigned c. 1659–80). Peshwa-ship was resurrected following Shahu's death in 1749, the peshwa Balaji Baji Rao became the de facto ruler of the Marathas, ushering in the vast **Maratha Confederacy**.

Rise of Peshwa, the Maratha Empire

Not often does one man stamp his presence in an entire sub-continent and establish an empire that spreads across the huge Indian land mass. His movements, from Delhi to Srirangapatnam and Gujarat to Berar over a twenty year period in the 18th century, were unequalled in speed and distance.

His innate ability to gauge the opponent's strengths and weaknesses and spring the trap when his enemy is lulled into what appeared a position of strength was his forte. A victory in every battle is a dream for any military leader. Bajirao achieved it because he had the head to plan and the hand to execute.

Around 1720, the Mughal throne had seen four occupants over two years, the Marathas were a rising power and Bajirao's father Balaji Vishwanath had shored up Chhatrapati Shahu's fortunes by not just obtaining a 'legal sanction' from the imploding Mughal, but also found a way to expand Maratha influence and power by carving separate fields of operation for the restless Maratha chiefs. A lot was left undone when Balaji Vishwanath died in 1720. A grateful Shahu looked no further than Bajirao to be his next Prime Minister at just twenty years of age over the heads of other claimants. The old order refused to co-operate, and Bajirao in choosing beyond the traditional Maratha aristocracy; appointed Malhar Rao Holkar, Ranoji Scindia and Udaji Pawar as his primary helpers. From here began the move towards an empire.

In the first few years, Bajirao helped the Nizam ul mulk to establish his rule at Aurangabad and was honoured by the Nizam for his role at the battle of Sakharkhedla in 1724. He then went on two campaigns to the south; to Chitradurg in 1725 and Srirangapatnam in 1726. An urgent summons from his king to ward off the threat posed by the Nizam brought him back to Satara. The Nizam, taking Sambhaji of Kolhapur along had threatened Shahu's very existence.

In a running battle marked by rapid moves, Bajirao surrounded the Nizam without his artillery at Palkhed and forced him into submission; the first time that wily Subahdar faced this ignominy in his long career. Not only did the Nizam accept all conditions but was forced to give up his support to Sambhaji of Kolhapur. Bajirao's battle plan at Palkhed has been described as a 'masterpiece of strategic mobility' by Montgomery of Alamein.

The very next year, Bajirao's brother Chimaji, who loyally supported and sometimes excelled him in battle, defeated and killed the Mughal subahdar at Amjhera and stamped Maratha authority in Malwa. This province was the link between Hindustan and the Deccan and therefore of pivotal importance. Around the same time,

Muhammad Bangash attacked Bundelkhand and threatened its aged ruler Chhatrasal. Folklore has it that Chhatrasal sent a wandering bard to Pune with a message for Bajirao. The story goes that the Peshwa heard the bard singing outside his palace-

जो गत गाह गजेन्द्रकी, सो गत भई है आय I
बाजी जात बुन्देलन की, राखो बाजी राय II

Translated it said,

‘Know you Baji rao; I am in that same sad plight in which a famous elephant was when caught by a crocodile. My valiant race is on the point of extinction. Come and rescue my honour’.

Peshwa Bajirao the most important figure after Shivaji

Bajirao moved quickly through an unfrequented path to surprise Bangash and rescue Chhatrasal. After a siege at Jaitpur, Bangash sought terms. Chhatrasal, ever grateful, gave Bajirao a third of his kingdom. He also gave him Mastani – a love affair that occupied the remaining ten years of Bajirao’s short life. In the years to come, Bajirao was not only accorded a warm welcome by friendly rulers at Jaipur and Udaipur but also respected by adversaries like Bangash, who even escorted the Peshwa’s mother Radhabai on a pilgrimage to Kashi.

The Peshwa, however, had to face resentment from other chiefs in the Maratha fold and when Senapati Dabhade, once again with the Nizam’s support, came out against Bajirao, the clash at Dabhoi proved fatal for Dabhade. Bajirao followed up with a campaign against the Abyssinian chiefs of Janjira in 1733, where Bajirao’s land attack combined with the naval prowess of Sekhoji Angre brought all the Siddi’s territory in his hands save Janjira itself. When it seemed in grasp, Sekhoji died and his brothers were caught up in a civil war. While Bajirao moved on to other pursuits, his brother Chimaji appa stepped in the Konkan and killed Siddi Sat, who had unleashed an oppressive reign in the Konkan.

At Palkhed or Bhopal, Bajirao used tactical movements using a purely cavalry borne army and brought an enemy to submission. The Nizam escaped on each occasion due to Shahu’s injunction to let him survive.

The attack on Delhi exposed Mughal weakness and awakened the ambition of the Persian King Nadir Shah. In 1739, Nadir Shah sacked Delhi, and sitting in the Sunehri masjid with an unsheathed sword, massacred many thousands until pleas for mercy stopped the slaughter. Mughal stalwarts like Nizam ul mulk were reduced to being mere supplicants while Sadat Khan was forced to commit suicide. The empty shell of the Mughals was exposed to the world. The Maratha army under Chimaji Appa was then liberating the north Konkan coast from the proselytising frenzy of the Portuguese. The fort of Vasai was captured at a heavy cost when Nadir Shah was still in Delhi. To ward off Nadir Shah, Bajirao mustered whatever troops he could and reached Burhanpur to stop his advance to the south.

After the death of Aurangzeb, the Mughal empire degenerated very quickly. It was broken into pieces and among the regional powers, the Marathas became the most powerful in India. Of course, there were independent kingdoms in several parts of India but they were all terrorised by the Marathas. The Marathas made the Mughal emperor their pensioner. They ruled over the provinces of Gujarat, Malwa, Maharashtra and Bundelkhand and claimed Chauth and Sardeshmukhi from the rulers of Rajasthan, Avadh, Bengal, Hyderabad Karnataka, Mysore etc. From Punjab in the North to the Cape Comorin in the South and from Gujarat in the West to Bengal in the East, the Marathas enjoyed supremacy. Yet, the Maratha power shook to its foundations in its very first confrontation with the English. In their first war against the English, they did not fare well ; in the second war they were defeated ; and, in the third war they were destroyed.

Maratha Empire, conflict with British the later years

Several factors have been assigned for the defeat of the Marathas against the English. Some of them were as follows :-

Internal Weakness of the Marathas

The empire of the Marathas was not a well-knit empire under one chief. It was a confederacy of five Maratha chiefs who, quite often, were in conflict with one another. The nominal unity of the Marathas remained only up to the period of the rule of Peshwa Madhav Rao I. After him, the Peshwa could not control his subordinate chiefs. The Sindhia, the Holkar, the Bhonsle and the Gaekwad pursued self-interested policies, which many times, were pursued against the interests of one another resulting in fighting among themselves. The British took complete advantage of it. The Maratha chiefs themselves gave them the opportunity of interfering in their internal affairs and fighting against them one by one. Therefore, the absence of unity among the Marathas remained their weakness vis-a-vis the English from the beginning till the end.

The Marathas never attempted to create an organised, orderly and well-governed empire. They never took the responsibility of improving the economic, cultural and moral conditions of their subjects. Their primary aim remained plunder, particularly in the territories beyond their effective control. Therefore they failed to secure the loyalty of their subjects and the Indians in general even when they came into conflict with a foreign power. By the time the Marathas were locked in conflict with the English they had lost their human virtues. The Marathas had succeeded against every other native power because of certain qualities of their character, viz., simplicity, hard labour, determination to fight against all odds. But, gradually they lost them all. By losing their morals – and thereby, their vitality, they remained no better than the rest of the native rulers and therefore, met the same fate at the hands of the English.

Lack of Political Foresight

The Marathas lacked political wisdom and farsightedness. When they had become the strongest power in India, the only wise course for them was to remove the last semblance of the Mughal Empire and assume the authority and responsibility of the Imperial power. Instead like many other groups at the court and outside, they simply desired to control the Mughal emperor and use his name and dignity for achieving their narrow objectives. They therefore, failed to achieve political unity of India and, thereby, failed to utilize the resources of the country either for the benefit of its people or for meeting the challenge of a foreign foe.

Incapable Leadership

All capable Maratha chiefs died by the end of the eighteenth century. After that the leadership of the Marathas was taken over by Bajji Rao II, Daulat Rao Sindhia, Jaswant Rao Holkar and Nana Phadnavis. Among them Bajji Rao was completely incompetent, Daulat Rao Sindhia and Jaswant Rao Holkar were selfish and the role of Nana Phadnavis is a matter of controversy. Thus, the Marathas lacked capable leadership. On the other hand, the English produced remarkable leaders like Lord Wellesley, Lord Hastings, Arthur Wellesley, General Lake and Civil Officers like Elphinstone, Malcolm etc. This was certainly one of the major causes of the failure of the Marathas against the English.

Weakness in the Social Organisation of the Marathas

The Marathas had grown to power because of the spirit of Maratha nationality which Shivaji had created among them. It was this spirit which had broken the backbone of Aurangzeb. But the spirit was lost afterwards. The caste-system raised its ugly head. In many Cases, the Peshwas were challenged by other Maratha chiefs, simply because they were Brahmanas. Feudal organisation of the army and the system of collecting revenue by hereditary chiefs further divided the Maratha society. The division of society into varied and sometimes conflicting groups certainly weakened the Marathas.

Jagirdari System

The Jagirdari system grew among the Marathas during the period of war of Independence against Aurangzeb when every Maratha commander was allowed to keep as his own jagir the territory captured by his own efforts. Peshwa Bajji Rao attempted to remove this evil and desired that a jagir should be jointly held at least by two persons. He fought against the Senapati on this very issue and was successful. But, his efforts were given up after his death and different Maratha chiefs kept their independent jagirs. That finally resulted in the formation of Maratha confederacy and the Maratha empire no more remained one entity. Besides, Maratha chiefs distributed jagirs to their officers for facilitating collection of Chauth and Sardeshmukhi which led to the growth of jagirdari system. The system did not permit Maratha chiefs to centralize their economic and thereby their military resources as well. It weakened Maratha chiefs in all respects.

Neglect of Economic Affairs by the Marathas

Maharashtra does not have fertile land. The Marathas neglected to develop its economic resources. Therefore, it lacked the necessary means to feed an empire. When the Marathas captured extensive territories both in the North and the South, they could make up this deficiency by a sound system of administration. But they neglected it. Their primary source of income continued to be Chauth, Sardeshmukhi and plunder which they got from the territories of other native rulers. But, income by such means was irregular and insufficient. The Maratha empire, therefore, never achieved economic stability. The Marathas by neglecting the economy of the territories under their direct rule and plundering the territories of other native rulers brought misfortunes not only to their empire but also to the people of India in general.

Military Weakness of the Marathas

The Marathas were certainly weaker than the English militarily. Different scholars have assigned different reasons for it. Dr. S. N. Sen expressed the view that “When the Marathas adopted European means of warfare they recruited people of different races in their army. Therefore, their army no more remained a national army and lost that strength which a national army usually possesses. That constituted their primary weakness.” This view is not acceptable to many other historians. It has also been very emphatically observed by some other historians that the Marathas lost their battles against the English because the Marathas left their traditional method of guerilla warfare and adopted the European methods. The view, however, contains only partial truth. The guerilla method of warfare could be certainly effective in the plateau of the Deccan but it is doubtful if it could be very effective in the plains of north India. The majority of the historians, therefore, say that the primary cause of the military weakness of the Marathas was that they adopted European means of warfare but failed to perfect them. The factories established by the Peshwa and the Sindhia for manufacturing guns and arsenals did not produce sufficient material of a good quality. The same way, the Maratha soldiers trained by the French in European methods did not achieve perfection in their training. The dependence of the Marathas on the French for training and command of their armies also proved to be their weakness because the French mostly left them in their hour of crisis. _

The Superior Diplomatic Skill and Spy-system of the English

The English were more diplomatic than the Marathas. The quarrels among the Marathas always provided them useful opportunities. Besides, the English had their eyes on the politics of entire India. That is why they could isolate each of the Maratha chiefs and defeat them one by one. The Marathas, on the other hand, could not even realise that their strongest enemy were the English.

The English had organised a superior system of espionage. Apart from the regular system, every Englishman was interested in probing the strength, organisation and the movements of the Maratha army and the mutual relations between the Maratha chiefs. This certainly placed the English always in an advantageous position.

The Marathas were not inspired by any ideal in fighting the English while the latter were inspired by the spirit of nationalism and imperialist aims. Besides, by the time the English power grew in strength in India the Marathas had already lost their vitality and therefore, they could not face the onslaught of the English and were defeated and disgraced.

The Jagirdari system grew during the course of Maratha war of independence

The attempt of Peshwa Baji Rao to eliminate this system remained successful only during his life-time. The system developed after his death. It resulted in the formation of Maratha confederacy and thus, broke their unity. Besides, it grew further under different Maratha chiefs and did not allow them to centralize their economic and military resources and, thus, weakened them all.

Conclusion

After Aurangzeb's death, the Mughal Empire descended into civil war, with his many sons vying for the throne. Farrukhsiyar, one of the claimants, was supported by Chhatrapati Shahuji. The Marathas marched on Delhi after selecting Balaji Vishwanath as Peshwa (Prime Minister) and succeeded in deposing Emperor Bahadur Shah and installing Farrukhsiyar on the throne. The new sovereign, grateful for Maratha help, issued a proclamation allowing the Marathas the authority to collect taxes in Mughal territory under Maratha control while also extending swarajya to the Maratha homeland. Shahuji's mother was also freed from Mughal captivity thanks to Peshwa Balaji Vishwanath's efforts. The Peshwas launched a programme of expansion with Balaji Vishwanath (appointed on November 16, 1713), which saw the Marathas reach their highest extent. Balaji's son, Peshwa Baji Rao I, extended the kingdom even farther, including most of modern-day central and southern India. Meanwhile, under the protection of the Maratha Chhatrapati, the Mughals were reduced to little more than puppets.

The great effort put in by the Marathas to coronate Shivaji and officially create the Maratha Empire in 1674 demonstrates their dedication to creating a traditional Hindu kingdom in the subcontinent. This came at a time when grand Hindu imperial coronations were rare, due to most rajas being the rulers of smaller states or under Mughal control. During the coronation, Shivaji housed and fed 50,000 guests including Brahmins (Hindu priests) from all over India, had himself weighed against seven metals and various valuable spices, all before bathing in water brought over from the Ganges river, sacred to Hindus. Finally, he was declared lord of the umbrella (Chhatrapati, his title), a traditional symbol of kingship for great Hindu and Buddhist rulers, in imitation of the gods Varuna and Vishnu, signifying that the world was encompassed under the great king's umbrella. Thus, by intent and symbolism, it is clear that the Marathas were clearly establishing an empire steeped in Hindu culture and symbolism, if not formally so in a political manner.

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